Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Hong Kong Students Consider Virtual Reference a Vital Service and It Can Aid in Many Stages of Learning

Tsang, A. L. Y., & Chiu, D. K. W. (2022). Effectiveness of virtual reference services in academic libraries: A qualitative study based on the 5E learning model. The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 48(4), Article 102533. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2022.102533

Samantha J. Kaplan

Citer ce compte rendu

Résumé de l'article

Objective – Understand how virtual reference services (VRS) impact students' learning using the 5E model (engage, explore, explain, elaborate, evaluate) as a theoretical framework.

Design – Exploratory qualitative study.

Setting – Major university in Hong Kong.

Subjects – There were 10 participants between the ages of 18 and 35, including undergraduate and postgraduate students and one alumnus of the university.

Methods – Online synchronous semi-structured interviews of 30 minutes via Zoom. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically according to the 5E learning model.

Main Results – WhatsApp was the preferred form of VRS, over Zoom, email, or phone. VRS can facilitate better awareness of library resources and supports resource exploration. WhatsApp VRS is particularly valuable for students who may find other modes intimidating, overly formal, or inaccessible due to time constraints. VRS has grown in importance since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion – VRS provided via instant messaging is a valued service for students, but libraries, library websites, and librarians can all work to improve awareness of the option and possible uses. Future work is needed to understand how demographics may influence patrons' attitudes and experiences of VRS.

B **Evidence Based Library and Information Practice**

Evidence Summary

Hong Kong Students Consider Virtual Reference a Vital Service and It Can Aid in Many Stages of Learning

A Review of:

Reviewed by:
Samantha J. Kaplan
Research & Education Librarian, Liaison to the School of Medicine
Duke University Medical Center Library & Archives
Durham, North Carolina, United States of America
Email: Samantha.kaplan@duke.edu

Abstract

Objective – Understand how virtual reference services (VRS) impact students' learning using the 5E model (engage, explore, explain, elaborate, evaluate) as a theoretical framework.

Design – Exploratory qualitative study.

Setting – Major university in Hong Kong.

Subjects – There were 10 participants between the ages of 18 and 35, including undergraduate and postgraduate students and one alumnus of the university.

Methods – Online synchronous semi-structured interviews of 30 minutes via Zoom. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically according to the 5E learning model.

Main Results – WhatsApp was the preferred form of VRS, over Zoom, email, or phone. VRS can facilitate better awareness of library resources and supports resource exploration. WhatsApp VRS is particularly valuable for students who may find other modes intimidating, overly formal, or inaccessible due to time constraints. VRS has grown in importance since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion – VRS provided via instant messaging is a valued service for students, but libraries, library websites, and librarians can all work to improve awareness of the option and possible uses. Future work is needed to understand how demographics may influence patrons' attitudes and experiences of VRS.

Commentary

This article was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme's CASP Qualitative Checklist (2018). In terms of the validity of results, there is a clear statement of research aims: to explore library users' perceptions and preferences of VRS in an academic library in Hong Kong. However, the methodology is not entirely appropriate, as the authors state it was an exploratory qualitative study using the 5E model as a theoretical framework but also report frequency counts and observed demographic differences in participants' perceptions of VRS, hallmarks of quantitative approaches (Tsang & Chiu, 2022, p. 7). While they acknowledge that further studies are needed to understand demographic differences, the purposive sample of 10 participants is not enough to know if their observations are valid at all.

The authors provide the interview questions, which address the research issue. Unfortunately, the authors do not provide nearly enough information on their recruitment strategy, other than stating that they "adopted purposive sampling to select participants who fit a particular purpose or criteria" (Tsang & Chiu, 2022, p. 3). While they do summarize their participants' age and the program in which they are enrolled, information about how they were recruited and selected would be valuable. The CASP checklist asks whether the relationship between researchers and participants has been considered, and this is another area where the authors have omitted clarity. By not disclosing how they recruited participants and any possible relationship between them, they somewhat undermined the reliability of the findings.

While the findings are reported in great detail, with a clear chain of evidence between themes, quotations, and codes, more information about the actual data analysis process would increase confidence. The authors do not indicate if software was used for coding, if there was a codebook, how said codebook might have been developed, if they collaborated on coding, and how conflicts may have been resolved. One assumes the 5E learning model, which guided their framework and research question development, played a significant role. The authors explicate the phases of the 5E model with participant quotes in their analysis. The 5E model is an interesting choice for this study because it relies on student perceptions of the effectiveness of VRS without any additional assessment. The interview guide is structured in a way that could potentially predispose students to confirmatory answers, as it consists of structured and semi-structured questions that presume VRS effects on learning, potential to improve outcomes, and other positives rather than coming from a more neutral place.

The actual findings are valuable, if challenging to trust based on the methodological reporting gaps outlined above. The authors report that WhatsApp is the preferred form of VRS, compared to Zoom, email, or telephone. In their coding, this is partially because patrons can keep and retrieve saved records, though participants did note privacy concerns. This is interesting, given that a 2015 study by Yang and Dalal, which randomly sampled 362 four-year colleges' websites, reported that 47.5% of college libraries provided instant messaging as a VRS and that the "top five chat web-based/software products used by libraries in the sample include LibraryH3lp, QuestionPoint, LibChat, Zoho, and KnowItNow24/7" (p. 71). These are products that are embedded in library websites, as opposed to

WhatsApp, which is a mobile app available to patrons without necessarily navigating to a library website. This distinction may make WhatsApp or similar messaging apps far more accessible to patrons, though privacy concerns and setting realistic expectations about response times may be challenging for libraries. Thus, given that some of the more conceptual findings are based on WhatsApp as a preferred VRS, readers should be cautious about transferring this to their own settings.

The authors are right to comment on the COVID-19 pandemic making VRS more important than ever. Their findings in this area add to a growing body of literature body about the emergence of VRS as essential to patrons at this time.

References

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. (2018). *CASP qualitative checklist*. https://casp-uk.net/images/checklist/documents/CASP-Qualitative-Studies-Checklist/CASP-Qualitative-Checklist-2018.pdf

Tsang, A. L. Y., & Chiu, D. K. W. (2022). Effectiveness of virtual reference services in academic libraries: A qualitative study based on the 5E learning model. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *48*(4), Article 102533. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2022.102533

Yang, S. Q., & Dalal, H. A. (2015). Delivering virtual reference services on the web: An investigation into the current practice by academic libraries. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 41(*1), 68–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.10.003